KATERINA KARAMITROU
ΑΙΚΑΤΕΡΙΝΗ ΚΑΡΑΜΗΤΡΟΥ

"PERFORMING METAMORPHOSIS AND DEHUMANIZATION OF THE TRAGIC HEROINES IN AESCHYLUS"

Apart from the Sociogical and Political facts[1] which only provide us with information on the "real" state of things in the Firth Century B.C. Athens, what stands as most challenging in the "personae" of the Aeschylean women, is the representation of their "psyche". The displayed material of literary criticism and dramatic theories on the analysis and characterization of women in Aesclylus is immense.[2] What could be, nevertheless, the most creative approach for the concept and understanding of the complex, "monstrous" psyche, who acts and suffers for the desirable freedom, provoking any sacrifice, even that, of her utmost destruction...?[3] The portrayal of the striking elements of the tragic heroine, whose personal deed becomes identified with the cosmic order, suggesting thus, the miraculous "individuation", dissolved into the contrasts, demands certain thorough observations on the female characters of Aeschylus. Who are these tragic heroines with the two-fold nature, the hidden power and the unrevealed desire? Women's passion and "ontological" grief consists of a deep ritual eroticism[4]. Female nature does not remain imprisoned in its role but proceeds beyond the conventional terms[5]. These "man-counselling hearted" women like

---

1. EUBEN J.P., "The Tragedy of Political Theory — The Road Not Taken", Princeton University Press, New Jersey, (1999).
2. POMEROY, S.B., "Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity" Robert Hale, London (1976).
3. LORAUX, N., "Facons Tragiques de duer une Femme" Hachette, Paris (1985).
4. ΧΕΙΜΩΝΑΣ, Γ., Ευριπίδη «Μήδεια»: Πρόλογος - Μετάφραση.
5. NUSSBAUM, M.C., "The Fragility of Goodness — Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosopdhy", Cambridge Univ. Press, Cambridge (1986).

Antigone or Klytaimnestra could portray an ordinary Athenian woman rather than standing as dramatic archetypes fulfilling - for the duration of a performance only-the fantasies, the inhibitions and unused possibilities of women of everyday life. Klytaimnestra[6] although bearing "male" characteristics, she is never, yet, abandoned by her female nature. Exceptionally interesting is the "ceremonial" experience of the tragic heroine's passion, dehumanization and melancholia represented in Greek drama and especially in Aeschylus. The body of the actor and the individual[7] who plays the role of Klytaimnestra is as well an object of political purpose in the Fifth Century Athens, and he, being a man, is called to penetrate women's world through his experience in political and social life. The paradoxical element of the transformation of female personalities from prudent and fragile creatures into witches and maenads makes these characters imposing and interesting. Klytaimnetra's persona for example, consists of controversial elements: she is powerful in her stubbornness; she never yields and above all, she never abandons her status. Although despotic and bewitching and always acting beyond convention, these women could not be characterized as evil and hunters of authority but they rather honestly respond to the "hermaphrodite" element of human nature disturbing thus, the balance. Topics of this sort should we endeavour to investigate, in order to obtain new and interesting ideas. The most significant though, would be to succeed an authentic initiation into the female enigmatic psyhe. But the restricted space of an article does not allow investigations of such complex matters. For this reason, in this article, I will deal with the most remarkable observations on the female personalities of Aeschylus, such as the performing "metamorphosis" and "dehumanization "of the tragic heroine.

Aeschylus is represented in the "Frogs" of Aristophanes, as the type of Archaic maleness. This idea is not peculiar to Aristophanes. It is recorded in the anecdotal biographical tradition that he, wished to be remembered, for the fact that he fought at the battle of Marathon. Although misogyny taints the Ancient literature, yet, Aeschylus chooses to highlight female personalities like that of Klytaimnestra instead of male characters. Is it inevitable then, that he provides these women

---

6. Ibid: *«γυναικός ανδρόβουλον κέαρ»* — Αισχύλου «Αγαμέμνων».
7. EASTERLING, P.E., "Presentation of Character in Aeschylus", Greece and Rome 20 (1973), pp. 3-19.

with "male" characteristics according to his education, or how else could he acquire such knowledge of female representation[8]?

Apart from the fact of the sources' limitation the play, essentially, has always been the real thing. Aeschylus' characterizations are assumed to have been thought by him to have been within the range of acceptability for the audience of his time as presented within the generic confines of tragedy. Such evidence as we have, despite misogynistic themes, suggest a more balanced situation than satirists like Semonides suggest. In any case, an enormous amount of secondary critical material dealing with feminist issues and themes has been written about Greek literature in the past quarter of the century, works like those of Mary Lefkowitz, Sarah Pomeroy, Nicole Loraux and many others. Nevertheless, what has to be considered here, is the characterization as it is conveyed by the extant material, and for me, the play, essentially, is the only valid revealing source. Adherence to the critical assumptions of traditional scholarship and historical and literary criticism, is no doubt necessary, for the development of an original outcome. Scientific knowledge alone is, yet, not enough and could often lead to mordant sarcasm or even to a feminism of morbidness like that of Pomeroy's. The point is to perceive and understand through the play, the human possibilities of these female characters.

We have to bear in mind that we have at our disposal only a very small proportion of the actual dramatic achievement of Aeschylus.[9] The fact that what we possess represents a selection sifted out for educational purposes in antiquity, need not tempt us to take value judgements either positive or negative in relation to the present theme, though we cannot discount the effects of a selective process entirely. The fragments of Aeschylus tell us relatively little about the characterizations in plays of which are represented by only a few lines or brief references in later authors. However, what is elicited from a review of the collected fragments is the fact that many of the plots seem to have provided opportunities for female characterization of a vivid and significant kind. Despite Pomeroy's suggestions that Bronze age paradigms for tragic heroines are irrelevant to our understanding of the role and situation of women in Classical Greece, these paradigms were

8. Ibid: note 2: Pomeroy.
9. KARAMITROU, K., "The Representation of Female Characters In The Extant Plays And Fragments of Aeschylus" ,Southampton Univerity (1994).

obviously acceptable to a degree in the dramatic context in which they appear. This may reasonably be taken to imply that they seemed to an Athenian audience to fall within the context of a possible range of human behaviour and not to lie entirely outside the concept of humanity. Consider the role of fairy princesses in folk-tales they are recognisably human and no Jungian archertype need be summoned into the discussion to make them so. There is the possibility that Antigone[10] was a type rather than a unique phenomenon. Definitely though, was not a "bad woman" as Sourvinou-Inwood" argues. Admittedly the characters of the New Comedy are more obviously naturalistic, but they are subject to a different set of stresses from their tragic equivalents.

It is perhaps a surprising fact that when Pericles made his "Funeral Speech", in which he rocommended that wifely duty suggested that a woman be spoken of, in male society, as little as possible, for good or ill, he actually was married to Aspasia! He had his problems. A masculine society can have restrictions about bringing womenfolk (wives, sisters, daughters, kinswomen) into male conversation without being conspicuously patronizing towards or suppressive of women.

Euben, takes the view that tragedy was a performing model, what we might characterize as a "diorama" of democratic process. This is a useful but limited notion and to resume my point, the characters of Comedy were ordinary folk, the superlative individuals of tragedy who produce the male-female conflicts, posed in a pervasive and demanding way.[11]

---

10. SOURVINOU - INWOOD, C., "Sophocles' Antigone as a "Bad Woman", in writing Women into History: Amsterdams Historische Reeks 17, Historisch Seminarium Van De Universiteit Von Amsterdam, edided by Fie Dieteren and Els Klock (1990), pp. 11-38.

11. NIETZSCHE, F., "The Birth of Tragedy", trans .By W. Kantmann, Vintage, New York (1966).
Also see:
ROMILLY, J., de, "L'Evolution de Pathetique d' Eschyle a Enripide", Presses Universitaires de France, Paris (1961).
STEINER, G., «The Death of Tragedy», Faber and Faber (1961).
HALL, E., "Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self Definition through Tragedy", clarandon Press (1991).
ARTAUD, A., "Le Theatre et son Double", Gallimard - Metamorphoses, Paris (1938).

Aristotle, would have supposed New Comedy characters generally incapable of tragic action or suffering for that reason. If we altered their circumstances we could rewrite them as tragedy. The relative decline of heroic values rather than societal changes, may account for the death of tragedy in the Fourth Century. We recall Steiner's view, that tragady is only possible if we regard the individual as having a predominant importance. There can be no such thing as a communal tragedy.

One of my principal assumptions, it will be clear I suppose, is that ancient drama, here specifically that of Aechylus, is understandable and further, capable of being acted in a way which communicates without the aid of culturally comparative adjuncts. In real art the definition of the "theatrical element" is of that element which contains a particular substance ("ousia") and interest. It is the way, the quality, the grandeur, in which the tragic heroine faces extreme ideas and passions like those of Eros, Revenge, Desire for authority, Motherhood... For these and olny basic reasons, female figures like that of Klytaimnestra, Atossa, Antigone, Hecuba, Agaue, Kassandra are unsurpassable. These are the women who in a primeval "magic" power unfold the "duality" of their terrible ("deini") nature. And this is the "miraculous" element in the women of tragedy: obedient and feminine from one side, bewildered, vengeful, furious witches from the other.

What makes these female creatures particularly "tragic" and important is the fact that during the unpredictable development of their character they are transformed into "dehumanized" figures who rush upon their eventual "pathos". The question arises: whether it is a matter of justification, moral settlement, or a particular madness of the female sex, or is it a cry out of mystical powers implanted in and inhabiting the female "psyche": a primordial bitterness and hatred which inhibited inspires acts of retribution against the social and political order involving what appears to be a preordained role. If Hegel's reflection that the tragic characters' power lies in the fact that they are servants of "logos", being as much guilty as innocent and always identified with what they want and what they act, is right, then we have to trace and despoil that wish and that action.